5 What is claimed

1. A method for separating sterols from the neutral substances comprising the sterols, the method comprising:

(a) providing a hydrocarbon fraction containing the neutral substances;

(b) optionally washing the hydrocarbon fraction with water;

(c) separating the neutral substances from the hydrocarbon;

(d) evaporation fractionating the hydrocarbon fraction from step (a) or step (b), or the neutral substances from step (c), to obtain a sterol-rich fraction.

(e) dissolving the sterol-rich fraction in a solvent and crystallizing the sterols from the solvent; and

(f) separating the obtained sterol crystals from the solvent.

2. The method of claim 1, wherein the hydrocarbon fraction is prepared by extracting a soap with a hydrocarbon solvent, and thereafter separating the hydrocarbon phase from the soap phase.

3. The method of claim 2, wherein the extraction is carried out at a temperature of at least 140°

4. The method of claim 3, wherein the temperature is between 140_C and 190°C

5. The method of claim 2, wherein said extracting step is conducted with an

extraction mixture comprising the soap, the hydrocarbon solvent and water, which are present in the extraction mixture at a weight ratio of 1 : ≥1 : >1.

6. The method of claim 5, wherein the soap, the hydrocarbon solvent and the water are present in the extraction mixture at a weight ratio of 1 : 1-3 : 2-6.

7. The method of claim 5, wherein the soap, the hydrocarbon solvent and the water are present in the extraction mixture at a weight ratio of 1 : 2-3 : 3-6.

8. The method of claim 5, wherein the soap, the hydrocarbon solvent and the water are present in the extraction mixture at a weight ratio of 1 : 2-3 : 4-5.

9. The method of claim 1, wherein the washing step (b) is carried out at a temperature between 120°C and 190°C.

10. The method of claim 1, wherein the evaporation fractionating step (d) is carried out at such conditions that the sterol-rich fraction is obtained as a bottom fraction.

11. The method of claim 1, wherein the evaporating fractionating step (d) is carried out at such conditions that the sterol-rich fraction is obtained as a distillate.

12. The method of claim 1, wherein the hydrocarbon in the hydrocarbon fraction is selected from the group consisting of hexane, heptane, octane, cyclohexane, methylcyclohexane and mixtures thereof.

13. The method of claim 1, wherein the solvent is selected from the group consisting of a hydrocarbon, a C_1-C_6 alkanol, water and mixtures thereof.

14. The method of claim 13, wherein the C_1-C_6 alkanol is methanol.

15. The method of claim 13, wherein the solvent is a mixture of the hydrocarbon, the C_1-C_6 alkanol and the water, in a weight ratio of 1.5-5 : 0-0.5 : 0-1.

16. The method of claim 15, wherein the weight ratio is 1.5-3.5 : 0.03-0.35 : 0-1.

17. The method of claim 1, wherein in step (e) the sterol-rich fraction and the solvent are present in a weight ratio of 1 : 1.5-6.5, based on the dry weight of the sterol-rich fraction.

18. The method of claim 17, wherein the weight ratio is 1 : 1.5-5.

19. The method of claim 1, comprising the further step of washing the sterol crystals after the crystallizing step (e).

20. The method of claim 19, wherein the crystals are washed with a solvent which is the same as the solvent used in step (e).